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AUTHOR Brown, June
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ABSTRACT

Ways to improve the parent school relationship are suggested. Discussion of recommendations of "A Nation at Risk," the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, concerning computer use in schools, discipline, homework, and leadership and fiscal support is followed by a brief exploration of ways educators can enlist public support. Approaches suggested include group parent conferences, individual parent conferences, personal notes, newsletters, recognition of parents, volunteers, school open houses, use of parents as resources for instruction and fund-raising, highlighting parents' talents, and publicity via mass media. (RH)

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UTILIZING THE NATION AT RISK RECOMMENDATIONS TO REACH EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE

June Brown

"The direction in which education starts a man will determine his future life."--Plato

Upon reading the quotation from Plato, we might consider what predictions he would make about the future of education in the United States today. Almost every state in the nation has recently examined its educational systems, made numerous changes, and proposed recommendations to reach educational excellence. These changes were probably initiated by the National Report on education. In August 1981, Secretary of Education, Terrel Bell, created an eighteen member National Commission on Excellence in Education. A report was published by the Commission in April 1983, entitled, "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform." The report received mixed reviews from the media and the community of professional educators. A portion of the report stated that educational institutions and society, as a whole, seemed to have ignored the basic purposes of schools, and have lost sight of the high expectations and disciplined efforts to attain them. Furthermore, the report hoped to generate educational reform and renew the nation's commitment to high quality in the schools and colleges across our land.

A point of irony is that teachers and administrators had been waving a red flag at society for years, warning that education was bound to suffer as top educators fled from the profession due, in part, to low salaries. In addition to low

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salaries, teachers had been alarmed by the public's lack of concern regarding two additional factors: 1. Discipline - Teachers have been forced to try to teach children who do not want to learn. Their personal safety was often threatened by undisciplined juvenile delinquents. 2. Lack of Parental Support - Teachers have expressed concern for years regarding the declining support received from parents and community leaders. Teachers should not be condemned for failures stemming from the home and a society that condones lack of discipline and disrespect for educational institutions.

Since the National Report was issued in 1983, there has been a tidal wave of response across our country. Many states and individual school districts have established their own committees to study the inherent strengths and weaknesses in their schools and make recommendations for improvement. We have already observed some positive changes in the rise of Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores. These improved scores need to be communicated to the public. The national average verbal score on the SAT rose one point to 426 in 1984, and the average mathematical score rose three points to 471. The gains in SAT scores occurred despite an increase in the number of students taking the test. Usually, greater numbers of students taking the test will result in lower average scores. We do not know why the scores have risen, but the test-takers reported taking more high school courses in nearly all academic subject areas than the previous year's seniors. The fact that these students have a broader academic background may be a direct

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result of the Nation at Risk recommendations to improve high school curriculum.

After allowing the shock caused by the Nation at Risk Report to subside, it can be stated that not all our schools were found to be failures. We are still the most prosperous, productive nation on earth. There are thousands of competent, dedicated teachers whose worth can never be fully compensated --even with merit pay. It would be foolish, however, to pretend that we have no problems in public education. But the strengths and weaknesses may differ from school to school. What we must have is significant economic development and public support to rank education as the top priority in every state. As educators, we must become better communicators about the positive things we are doing in schools today. The Nation at Risk report focused attention upon teachers, administrators, and society. We do not want to lose the momentum gained by the National Report; rather, we want to utilize the recommendations to make significant changes in improving our schools. As we communicate our strengths and accomplishments to parents, we must also stress their responsibility in the educational process.

Utilizing the Nation at Risk Report

Following are some suggestions of ways to help parents become our partners in education, rather than our adversaries. We will examine some recommendations of the Nation at Risk Report and plan some strategies to involve parents in the educational process.

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1. Computers - One recommendation for improvement in high school curriculum was the addition of one-half year of computer science. Many schools are teaching computer literacy, beginning in kindergarten. But how can we encourage parental support and participation? Parents are often insecure and uninformed regarding computer use. We need to educate them, much like we did when modern math first reared its head. It is difficult for parents to support and encourage their children in areas that are foreign to them. I suggest school districts offer mini-workshops for parents throughout the year to train and inform them as to the school's computer curriculum. Hands-on experience could be offered to help alleviate the fears parents have about the technology of computers. Programs on computer literacy could be planned through already existing organizations, such as Parent Teacher Associations.

2. Discipline - The National Commission recommended that the burden on teachers for maintaining discipline should be reduced through the development of firm and fair codes of student conduct. Teachers, administrators, parents, and students should have input into the formulation of an acceptable conduct and discipline policy. The policy should be well communicated, copies sent to parents, children informed as to the rules and consequences, and then adequately and consistently inforced. When adults cooperate, children have better defined guidelines and consequently, better behavior.

3. Homework - The National Commission suggested that students in high school be assigned more homework. Individual

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school districts should evaluate their homework policies and make changes as needed. Teachers must communicate their expectations to children and parents in order for parents to support the policy. It is true that there is strength in numbers; therefore, a homework policy is more apt to be successful if developed and utilized by the entire faculty. Parents must be informed as to their responsibilities in carrying out the policy. They can assist by providing a quiet place and a specific time for completion of the homework. Their supervision is necessary to assure that students learn to manage their time. Too many hours watching TV, a demanding work schedule, or too much time spent in extracurricular activities can prevent even a good student from completing homework assignments. Adult supervision is necessary, but the parents should not do the homework.

4. Leadership and Fiscal Support - Recommendations were made to involve the community in leadership roles and to achieve fiscal support for the schools. Education should be a top priority in all districts. Once again, it is imperative that teachers and administrators communicate their needs in an organized manner to the public. Individual districts should establish their own local commissions to examine their schools and make recommendations for change. We are not in the habit of tapping the business community to assist us with educational expenses. However, in recent years, many school districts have contacted local businesses and been rewarded with actual dollars and donated equipment. School boards should access

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community involvement and plan a strategy to encourage maximum support through leadership and financial gifts. Remember - the squeaky wheel gets the most grease.

Ways to Enlist Public Support

If we truly believe public support is an essential part of excellence in teaching, we will make an attempt to communicate and cooperate with parents and the community. The following list presents some attempts to do both:

1. Group Parent Conferences - Conduct at least two group parent meetings during the school year to communicate teacher goals and objectives. These meetings should provide an excellent forum for cooperation and build a strong foundation for public support once goals are clearly presented.

2. Individual Parent Conferences - Individual parent conferences should be conducted every semester. Valuable information about the student can be gained from cooperation with the parent. Be sure to tell parents about the good things their child is doing and end on a positive note. Provide time for the parents to ask questions and do not be on the defensive. Keep in mind that the conference should result in improved instruction (at home and at school) for the child.

3. Personal Notes - Send home personal notes praising particular achievements. Be sure every child receives a "warm fuzzy" note as often as possible during the year.

4. Newsletters - The principal should publish a weekly newsletter to inform parents and build school esteem and spirit.

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5. Recognize Parents - Plan a party near Mother's Day and recognize Fathers with a special program. Grandparent's Day is a perfect time to invite some senior citizens into your room. Remember, they still pay taxes and make wonderful volunteers.

6. Volunteers - Enlist volunteers to work in all areas--library, lunchroom, classrooms, office, etc. An extra adult can provide children with some individual attention in an overcrowded classroom. Be sure to have a Volunteer Orientation Coffee at the beginning of the year and a Volunteer Thank-You Tea at the end.

7. Open House - Have an all-school open house with children's work abundantly displayed. Be sure to invite the community leaders as well.

8. Resources - Invite adults into your classroom frequently to begin or culminate a special unit of study when it relates to their field of expertise. For example, a unit on flight can be highlighted by a visit with a pilot. A simple survey of your parents at the beginning of the school year can give you valuable information regarding their occupations, hobbies, and talents.

9. Financial Support - Encourage parents to conduct a school-wide fair, jog-a-thon, or similar drive to raise money for particular projects.

10. Presentations - Highlight specific talents by presenting music programs, art shows, science fairs, and math fests.

11. Publicity - Contact the local newspapers and radio

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stations regularly so they can present the "Good News" about education.

In summary, we can not assume community leaders and parents will automatically become involved in our public schools. As educators, we should not wait for their assistance and financial support, but actively encourage it. The results could be quite profound.

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